The organisational impact of undertaking a professional doctorate

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PRIMARY THEME – Professional impact and transformation

There exists debate on the impact of professional doctorates on students and their work organisations. The study investigates therefore the underlying mechanisms triggered through the interplay between agential and structural dimensions to develop a causal explanation of how organisational change may, or may not, result from the learning that arises from undertaking a Doctor of Education (EdD) programme.

The study used a combination of grounded theory techniques with the critical realist perspective to explore the causal mechanisms at play. Semi-directed interviews were conducted with 16 participants, five of whom where students from and EdD programme focused on Higher Education offered by a research-driven university based in the UK. The remaining 11 participants were work colleagues of the doctoral students who were well placed to comment on organisational change.

The study found that in certain cases the sharing of professional concerns with work colleagues generated social relations triggering collective meta-reflexive deliberations and corporate agency (Archer, 2007), which in turn gave rise to organisational change (structural elaboration). In cases were such interrelationships were not possible, restricted collective meta-reflexivity or even its absences, maintained the status quo and thus generated structural reproduction.

Collective meta-reflexivity refers here to the ability of students to engage in conversations with work colleagues around shared professional concerns, in ways that entail both a pursuit of social ideals and an awareness of the nature of this pursuit.

Variation in the students’ impact on their organisations was perceived to arise from the extent to which agency was aligned to political and organisational priorities and agendas. This highlights the instrumental nature of change and raises the question whose interests are served highlighting thus the importance of meta-reflexivity as a mechanisms promoting social ideals.

Learning on a professional doctorate should overcome the idea of knowledge production relevant only for the student’s personal growth. It should help the student to master a discourse that crosses both research and professional practice through the student’s capacity to engage others into that discourse in an organisationally relevant, yet critical fashion.

KEYWORDS
Collective meta-reflexivity, corporate agency, critical realism, impact, organisational change, professional doctorate

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